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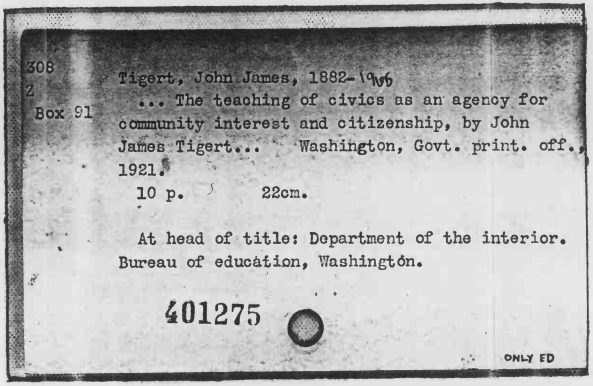

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
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# THE TEACHING OF CIVICS

## AS AN AGENCY FOR COMMUNITY INTEREST AND CITIZENSHIP

By JOHN JAMES TIGERT
United States Commissioner of Education

WASHINGTON
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE
1921

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## THE TEACHING OF CIVICS AS AN AGENCY FOR COMMUNITY INTEREST AND CITIZENSHIP.

In recent years all of our institutions have been passing through reforms. We have had problems on every hand—problems in the home, problems in the church, problems in business, problems in the State, and, no less than elsewhere, problems in the school. We found that there was something radically wrong with our whole system of instruction. The failure lay glaringly before our eyes. The old education for mind training through exercise of memory and reason, which had come down to us from ancient Greece, was suddenly found to be lacking in some respects for preparing our boys and girls in the best way to succeed in this modern, practical, work-a-day world. Too often boys and girls struggled through a subject, laboriously memorizing page after page, only to find that a perfect knowledge of such a curriculum did not somehow help them to do things any better when they were out in the world. We have discovered that there is a peril in the printed page. Boys and girls can become such good students that, when they leave school, they find themselves detached from the world of real life, and then they have to make a great struggle to fight their way back to the world of things and articulate themselves with realities again. This is probably the reason that some of the brightest pupils do not succeed like some of the apparently stupid ones when they get out into the world.

The point that we are making is that courses of study and methods of instruction must be practical, if they are

really to be of value to our boys and girls in this modern, practical world. We do not know of any branch of study where this applies with greater force than in the teaching of civics. The old style of teaching civics with a deadly adherence to a formal textbook, memorizing the names of officers, constitutions, branches and functions of government, etc., will never make active, public-spirited citizens of those who are compelled to pursue them. If civics is not capable of making better citizens, then the sooner it is dropped from the curriculum the better.

A committee of the American Political Science Association made a report recently on the teaching of civics in our high schools. This report, which is published in full in the March number of the School Review, emphasizes again the urgent necessity of creating a new body of material for the courses in civics and a different manner of instruction from that which has hitherto prevailed in most places. To quote in part from this report:

> The aims of civic instruction, as stated in the report of the association's committee of seven, published in 1916, should be as follows:
>
> 1. To awaken a knowledge of the fact that the citizen is in a social environment whose laws bind him for his own good.
>
> 2. To acquaint the citizen with the forms of organization and methods of administration of government in its several departments.
>
> In the case of schools the immediate problem is to bring to the mind of the pupil the fact that he is a living member of the community. The teaching of the subject should continually point toward active civic duty as well as toward civic rights. Scope and methods should be adjusted to this purpose, which means that the scope should not be confined to government alone, and that emphasis should be put upon relations rather than upon facts.

The difficulty lies chiefly in the materials of the course of instruction and in the manner of instruction. Let us make suggestions on these two phases of the problem. First, as to the course of study. The course of study should be made more practical, and this can be done by



making it detailed and concrete. While not abandoning entirely the theoretical basis of our institutions, yet the great emphasis in the course should be placed upon the practical applications of civil institutions. This is the proper function of the teaching of civics. Second, as to the method of instruction. In keeping with a more detailed and practical course of study, we should have a method that is similar to the methods of the natural sciences. The pupils should have an opportunity to actually see the things described and detailed in the course of study in actual operation. The subject matter of civics is too great and comprehensive to bring into a laboratory as we do in the case of sciences like chemistry, botany, and geology. Governments can not be held in test tubes and placed under microscopes. But the teacher of civics can get the same practical results as the teacher of science if he only realizes that in every community there is one vast laboratory for the studying and teaching of civics. This laboratory can not be set up in the school; so the school must go to the laboratory. The civics class should spend a great part of its time in the court house, in the city hall, and in the various other places where the actual practices of civil government are in operation. Much can be done with a large supply of models, charts, maps, etc., but this can not compare with the traveling about suggested here in arousing a practical interest in community and civic affairs. I know that it will be objected to this system that it is not always possible and that public sentiment would not tolerate it. Some will be inclined to look upon it merely as a continuous picnic. Of course, the rural teacher will not be able to employ this method, but there are few that will not be able to reach a community of sufficient size to make this kind of instruction profitable. If the school is located in a city, near a city, or especially near the capital, the plan will be all the more profitable.

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This project method of teaching civics has already been tried, and with results that are most gratifying. The plan was tried thoroughly in New York City, where, of course, its value would be greater possibly than in any other city in the country, except in Washington or one of the large State capitals. A group of teachers worked cooperatively under the general supervision and direction of Asst. Supt. John L. Tindsley. The instruction was undertaken chiefly by the teachers of history from each of the city's high schools and extended to only ninth grade pupils. The teachers accumulated and organized the materials for study around definite topics in such a way to make them approachable by boys and girls of the ninth grade. The account of these studies appeared in the Outlook magazine and has now been published in pamphlet form. An item about this work in New York was published in the February issue of the School Review, from which we would like to quote two paragraphs. The topics are as follows:

1. Protecting the Food of the City.
2. The Department of Public Charities.
3. The City's Water Supply.
4. Transportation and Communication in New York City.
5. Public Provision for Recreation.
6. The Department of Correction.
7. Safeguarding Life and Property.
8. City Planning.
9. Disposal of City Wastes.
10. Civic Beauty.
11. Heating and Lighting as Public Utilities.
12. The Public Regulation of Work.
13. The Regulation of Buildings.
14. Making the Laws.
15. How the Laws are Carried Out.
16. Judicial Action.
17. Guarding the Health of the City.
18. Paying the City's Bills.
19. Clothing.
20. The Part of the Citizen in Government.
21. How the Public Manages Schools.



The contents of the pamphlet "Guarding the Health of the City" are indicative of the treatment in the other bulletins. This paper opens with a description of the health conditions prevailing in New York during the fall of 1918. It credits the health department with a low death rate during those troublesome times. Each year 80,000 lives saved by sanitary provisions instituted by the Department of Public Health is given as the reason for a study of the organization and duty of that portion of the city's government. Duties of various officers and divisions are set forth: Sanitary, preventable diseases, infectious diseases, child hygiene, baby welfare, school medical inspection, employment certificates, foods and drugs, laboratories, hospitals, public health education, and records. The story of how each of these divisions functions for the public good, the value of each contribution to the general welfare, is clearly brought out in the pamphlet.

Pedagogical outlines for the teaching of this civic material are worked out in a city syllabus, planned, as was the subject matter itself, by a committee of teachers. All teachers are given certain minimals to include in their instruction, and in addition each is encouraged to add as much as she can for the enlightenment of her classes. After a year of this work, it may be confidently asserted that there is materially increased interest on the part of both the children and their parents. Indeed, city officials whose duties have been described in the pamphlets have themselves shown a willingness to cooperate by furnishing speakers for assembly programs and by sending out liberally various sorts of supplementary reading matter.

In the November number of the Elementary School Journal is an account of the most constructive piece of work that we have heard about in connection with the project method in teaching civics. A large school building in Chicago was situated in one of the most beautiful residential districts, and a problem arose as to how to take proper care of this splendid building. This problem was solved by each room in the school organizing itself into a civic club with some specific part of the building to look after. One class assumed responsibility for the care of the lawn, another the corridors, another the fountains, another the auditorium, another the pianos, etc. The result was most remarkable not only in arousing

sufficient civic pride in keeping the school beautiful, but the movement spread over the entire section of the city in which the school is located. Lawns were cut, old rubbish removed, unswept streets and littered alleys were cleaned up, shops with unsightly premises were made attractive, back yards were converted into gardens, property owners who had steadfastly refused paved their alleys, and so on with an indefinite number of improvements. Starting in the school as a project, one thing after another was suggested and the interest in civic betterment kept spreading until it finally swept the entire community. The community was not only greatly and unexpectedly benefited, but the boys and girls learned a great many more things than civics before they got done. Says the writer who tells of this marvelous experiment in practical civics:

> We felt that the results of our project were most gratifying, and that although it took almost five months and much hard labor, it was worth the effort. I have tried to correlate the project problems with almost all the subjects of the course of study and am sure that the pupils gained much in English, oral as well as written composition, civics, hygiene, spelling, manual training, art, and printing. Moreover, the moral influence was inestimable. It is my contention that since the ultimate aim of education is to prepare the child for discovery, the pupil should be given every opportunity to practice democracy in the civic life of the school. There is no reason why the project method could not be used to solve the numberless problems that confront the principal. When educators fully realize the importance of giving the pupils every opportunity of learning citizenship by practicing it in social situations of the school, they will have solved the fundamental principles in democratic control of the future citizens of our country.

This is the only method of teaching civics so as to really arouse great community interest upon the part of the pupils. While this method of taking the class or the school into the community and from place to place lends itself with peculiar propriety to the teaching of civics, we may suggest before closing this paper that the same



method may be applied to a reasonable extent in some other subjects. As a member of the Educational Corps of the United States Army in France, and after the armistice in Germany, it was my duty to teach history for several months. I had one class in history which I shall never forget. The school center of the First Division was located in a place called Arzbach, in Germany, just 2 miles from the town of Ems, where William I of Prussia dismissed the French ambassador, Benedetti, and whence he sent the famous Ems dispatch to Bismarck, who was in Berlin. As is well known, Bismarck published this dispatch next day in a mutilated form and precipitated the Franco-Prussian War. I shall never forget the day that I took my history class around the city of Ems and stood on the very spot in the garden where William dismissed Benedetti at 10 minutes after 9 o'clock on the morning of July 13, 1870, and lectured to them on the momentous consequences of what transpired on that spot where I stood. I have taught for 15 years, but I never knew what it was to really have interest in a subject until I had the opportunity of teaching history in this itinerant fashion. Nothing stirs the interest and the patriotism like visits to historic places, such as Independence Hall, Mount Vernon, Bunker Hill, etc. Likewise, nothing can ever compare with itinerant classes in civics for arousing a real interest in civic and community interest. Often the strangers passing through a community become more interested in its betterment than the residents, simply because these transients seldom fail to visit the places of public and historical interest, while all too often the resident thinks that he will visit these places at his leisure and he somehow never finds an opportunity, and consequently fails to display the interest that many outsiders readily acquire after a visit.

We once heard President Faunce, of Brown University, make an address in which he stated what we believe to be the proper approach to the study of any subject. Said he:

> The translation of a Latin sentence is not primarily an intellectual task; it is a matter of will-attitude, a matter of self-mastery in the presence of the unknown, the difficult, the complicated. The examination of a flower under the microscope is not a matter of counting stamens to be followed by the chasing of Latin names through a book; it is a matter of moral and æsthetic standards as well, of the pupil's power to wonder, to admire, to pursue the suggestions of nature until we reach the fundamental laws. The study of civics, of the origin of social institutions, can not be severed from our attitude toward humanity in general.

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